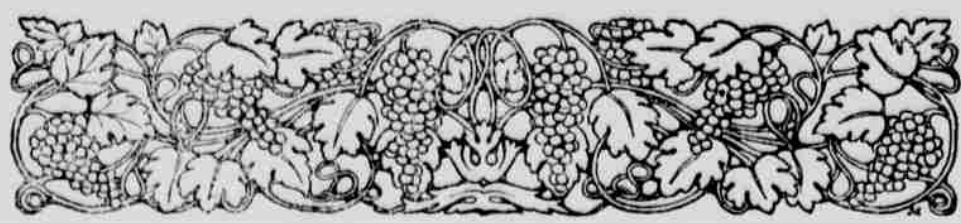




OUR SHORT STORY PAGE



TSHUSHIMA STRAITS



By James B. Connolly

I was the Russian battle fleet steaming northward toward the Sea of Japan. Twenty ships were in column and ten miles an hour the speed. From the quarter-deck of the "Kremlin" the American could hear the crew of the big turret at drill. By the clanking echo of the tumbling tray he could guess their speed.

He shed his head to himself: "No doubt you're brave and all of that, but you could stand an awful lot of practice."

By and by, the leading tray no longer sounding, the form of a sailor emerged from the turret hatch. A moment as if to get his bearings, another as if to take in the scene, and then in two nervous bounds he made the deck.

The American knew him for his man, but he finished his cigarette before stepping over to the other's side. "It's not this, Stephen Demetri Harlow, is it?"

"So-called?" the other replied in English. "So-called?" And then in French, "You speak a strange tongue, mister."

"Harlow?" Eh, I don't have it so, the American retorted, too in French. "You do not recall me?"

"Oh, yes, you are the American quarter-master who shipped at Hongkong."

"I am also an American naval officer on a leave of absence. My name is Mannix. I am that same young Mannix, the Annapolis cadet, who spent most of his furloughs in coming to see Her Grace's sister, before she became Her Grace. Does mister Harlow recall?"

The Russian paused before answering, and then he spoke English. "I recollect—very well, Ensign Mannix. Now, is it not a long time since we parted?"

"Quite a long time," said Mannix. "You are still in the navy, are you?"

"Not yet. And perhaps never. But she is concerned, and I am concerned, and her sister is concerned in what I have to say to you—if Stephen Demetri Harlow, enlisted man in His Imperial Majesty's navy, has a short half-hour to spare?"

"Some minutes, Mannix—half-hour is not best to let some matters rest."

"Not this matter, Your Grace. To-morrow you fight and to-morrow possibly—"

"I die?"

"Exactly."

"And why not you die also?"

"I die?"

"And if I die and you die, how can it matter to me?"

"It will not matter to us, but Her Grace—"

"Mannix?" There was a note of mockery in the Russian's voice.

the excitement, it does relieve the strain. But what have you there, Nikitin Osin?"

"It is a suit of clothes, and I am looking for a cord to tie them up."

"Clothes! Have you not your underclothes, and will they not be enough to swim in when the time comes?"

"No, no, a suit of clothes to dress properly afterwards. I shall stow these somewhere on the gun deck, and afterwards—"

"And how if there is no afterwards? How if one of your guns blows up and you with it?"

"Ah-h!" and Nikitin Osin shrugged his shoulders. "Then I shall wait to you."

Two or three laughed, and one by the piano, who had stopped his playing to catch the retort, set the machine in motion again.

Three others were gathered at a table on the starboard side, while a fourth was playing solitaire under the center cluster of incandescent lights. The officer with the bundle by a gesture indicated the solitaire player. "Look at him now."

The solitaire player looked up. "Oh well, it is you, Nicolas Osin, Vice-Admiral Misanthrope, cheer up!" And fixing his eyes on the bundles of clothing, "You are wise, too, Nicolas Osin. To-morrow morning, when I go off watch, I will envelop myself in the newest of underclothing, even to new socks, all of silk. The doctor says that if one is dressed in clean underclothing the danger of blood poisoning from a wound is much lessened. I should not like to die that way—by blood poisoning."

"Doctors," said the officer at the piano, "doctors give useful advice, sometimes."

"As to that," began the solitaire player. "I could tell you—"

"But did not, for just then one of the three officers of the starboard side began to unroll a plan of something or other."

"Ho, there!" the solitaire player scooped his cards into one pile. "What have you there, Alexai Fatsheff? Plans of battle evolutions, devolutions, revolutions?"

"It is a plan of my estate."

"What a lucky man to have an estate."

"I shall be luckier if—"

"We shall all be lucky, my friend, if by this time to-morrow night—"

An officer in dripping oil clothes entered the room. A half-dozen questions assailed him at once. "Still foggy?" "Yes," "Choppy?" "A little." "And the searchlights still playing?" "Yes. Only for the towing spars we should have run into each other a dozen times to-night." "And the enemy?" "No telling, but our wireless operator has been picking up wireless messages regularly."

"Then to-morrow?"

"It looks like it," and he passed on.

Mannix's division officer came along then, "Ah-h!" he said Mannix, gave him some rapid instructions in the event of a battle on the morrow, and then dismissed him.

prayer for Madeleine, whom, he now began to think, he might never see again.

The Russians were now capped. Every Japanese ship lay ready with a whole broadside to the head of the Russian column. Every ship in that long gray line opened up on the first four ships of the Russian line. Of the Russian ships, only those first four ships held the Japanese within range. Mannix's ship was in that first four.

It was a rain of metal. All about, the sea was whitecapped with the ricocheting shells. Had but one quarter of them come aboard, the Russian leaders would have been sunk in that first twenty minutes. But in that short time enough shells came aboard—without leaving the chart bridge Mannix could see that—enough to make a mess of steel partitions, enough to make splinters of most of the woodwork (which should long ago have been removed, but wasn't), enough to dismount several guns, to bowl over several gun crews.

Mannix would have liked to run about the ship to observe better how the men were behaving, but he did not dare to get too far away, in case they should need him at the wheel. But even from where he was he caught characteristic touches of the fighting Slav.

An officer called down to Mannix and sent him off with a message to the chief of the powder division. From this Mannix guessed that the internal communications had been shot away and also that many of the messenger boys had been killed off. Mannix found his powder division officer. He was the same who had been playing solitaire in the ward room the night before.

On his way back Mannix saw that it was going hard with the "Kremlin". The gunners, they meant well, but they did not know how. Mannix saw that one shell was jammed in a port on the gun deck and two plates were torn away from her forward; above the water line, it is true, and no great danger from that yet because the smoothness of the sea, but if the ship should list toward that side, there were holes in the smokestacks—several; but as yet only one showed signs of toppling over.

The enemy, having successfully completed their first maneuver, were now about to attempt a loop about the entire Russian fleet. They went about it in a superbly insolent manner, as if what the Russians did could not matter.

"Fine," said Mannix half aloud. It was his professional tribute to Japanese efficiency, and then they cut loose, and the next instant the entire port side of the bridge caved in. Also the steering gear was parted. "You are out of a job," said the piano player, smiling at him. "And I also," he added, hardly a moment later, and lay still. Mannix left the useless wheel and stepping over to the port side

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"And Sergei Herzar, he is gone, yes. Ps-st!" he made an upward move of his arm, "like that. And not so much as a button for a souvenir. Only this morning at breakfast he was speaking to me of a letter to his wife, and was much worried that she might not get it. There was a little estrangement before he left home, and he was asking forgiveness now, and now she will never know; for the mail box, of course, will sink with us. Oh, she will be sunk, there is no doubt of it. Our captain is one who will never strike his colors."

"The captain is dead," said Mannix.

"So? Too bad. But no matter, the Kremlin's colors will not be struck. But go on about your business. Suffer? Oh, no, no! But I am going, of course. Adieu."

Mannix rushed on to Pushkin's room, which was on the deck below. In a hundred ways the ship was now showing that she was hard hit. She would not much longer remain afloat, and Mannix wished to save a few little things which Pushkin had allowed him to stow away in his desk; that is, if he saved himself.

The after ladder to the quarter-deck had become impassable. He had to go clear amidships to find a ladder to the deck.

Mannix reached the quarter-deck. There they were still fighting the after-turret, irregularly as if not many of the crew were left. Mannix dropped into the turret. The duke was there, leaning against the casemate, wounded. Mannix asked after Pushkin. "The duke pointed to a body," "Dead?" asked Mannix. The duke nodded. "The explosion?" They had not enough men to work the one gun left. A trainer and a pointer were both lacking.

Mannix stepped up to the gun-pointer's telescope. He had had no serious intention of doing this, but now he could not help it. He turned to the duke. "With your permission?" he said. "Help yourself," said the duke pleasantly.

Mannix almost shouted with exultation as he fired. No strange work was this for him. On his own gunship he had been a turret officer. The first shot went to the mark. And the next. And then he heard at his ear: "She's going down surely. It is the boilers—they have blown up!"

"Leave-at once—everybody!" commanded the duke.

There was still a shell in the chamber of Mannix's gun. "We may as well fire this one," suggested Mannix.

"By all means," replied the duke.

Mannix, after looking back to make sure the breechblock was closed, pointed and fired. He saw a great commotion when it landed.

"A hull's-eye!" cried the one man who had stayed behind to see the effect. Only Mannix, the duke,

and this man were left in the turret. That man stooped to raise the duke in his arms. The duke was helpless. It was his legs, both legs.

"Isan, get out—quick!" commanded the duke.

"Yes, Your Grace, but with you," said Isan.

"Come," urged Mannix, "she is sinking, and you must try to help yourself."

"No, no, I will go down with her. I should not want to live after she is gone. But you must go. You are the kind that women love. You will win Madeleine, have no fear."

"But your wife?"

"What of her?"

"You believe in her?"

"Ah-h, but what does she think of me?"

Mannix looked at Isan, who saluted and lifted the duke through the under hatch and onto the quarter-deck. The ship was now to the gun deck and burning. The quarter-deck would soon be under. Mannix wondered what he could get that would float a man's body. Over by the wardrobe hatch he spied a table, or what was left of it unburned. Floating up from beneath. He was not sure that he could pull it through to the deck, but he tried. A half-burned leg broke off, then another, and then, Ivan rushing over and taking hold, it came through. There was also another small table, with some parts of the German piano and the wreck of a chair.

Mannix and Ivan lashed the two table tops together with strips of the tablecloth. They had now only to let them slide down from the steeply inclined deck to the ship's side. They lifted the duke, who was but half conscious, and laid him across the table top. It held him up without trouble. Mannix took hold of the chair for himself, but seeing a sailor looking at it wistfully, he asked, "Can you swim?"

"No, Your Excellency."

"Then take it."

boats, sailing cutters—drifting about to windward and not too far away.

The haze had gone entirely now and the sun shone clear—a low sun, for it was getting late in the afternoon. Mannix seized a chance to count the fleet. One other was gone besides the Kremlin, and two others looked as if they had not long to remain afloat. Hopelessly shot through these two were, and through the holes near the water line the sea was pushing.

As Mannix looked he saw a Russian destroyer range alongside the flagship. He guessed they were taking off the body of the admiral, the limp body was handled with such extreme care. There was no sea on, but the long, oily roll broke against the body of the big battleship and, resurging, lifted the little destroyer, now high up, and again let her sag away down. She looked, that once imposing battleship, like an old tramp steamer that had been lying for years on some beach till somebody happened to remember that she would make a good target for the fleet at target practice. And so they had taken her out and shot her up. Mannix marveled that she was still afloat.

At this point the duke cried out. Mannix turned his head. The Russian was struggling to lift himself to his elbow to see the flagship more clearly. "A pity—a brave man, our admiral," he said after a moment of observation, and then Mannix thought he heard him sob.

Mannix could count dozens of small pieces of wreckage. Floating in the water, clinging precariously to these bits of wreckage, were a few surviving sailors of the sunken ships. As they labored and struggled to get on, the destroyer of the enemy came tearing by. Her swash washed several of them into the sea. Most of the destroyer's crew seemed to be on deck, on their faces triumphant smiles. One called out and, leaning over the life line, laughed and pointed, and then threw what looked like a piece of exploded shell at one of these swimming sailors.

It did not strike the swimmer, who, looking over his shoulder and seeing where he came, hurriedly submerged himself. Evidently they wanted to have a little fun with him, for they ran close to him, as if trying to see how close they could come without actually running over him. Mannix happened to remember then: Why, this was the duke's man, Ivan. His revolver lay on the table beside the duke. He took it up, thinking to shoot one of them, but the destroyer was steaming perhaps twenty-five knots an hour and making a rapid turn she was end on and out of range. In the middle of the swirl under her quarter as she turned was the Russian sailor, Mannix thought he was gone, but he was a tough one, and when the destroyer and her grinning crew had passed on he bobbed up.

"Come here," ordered Mannix. He came up hand over hand. "Was it not true, what I told Your Excellency, that I could swim well?" he said smiling.

They reached one of the drifting boats. Ivan lifted in his master and then helped Mannix, after which there came a dull explosion.

"A torpedo," said the sailor, sentimentally. "Look, Your Excellency—the Bovedino." Mannix saw it, and the sight made him think of a death-stricken whale. Heavily, slowly, rolling from one side to the other, it went. And then solemnly, completely over and forever from sight.

Mannix heard the sound of a screw behind him. It was the Japanese destroyer again. A voice hailed, but he made no answer. She drew up and stopped her engines not fifty feet away. An officer was sitting on a camp chair on the side nearest to them. One elbow rested on the top life line, and in the hand of that arm, between two fingers, he held a cigar. His other elbow rested on his knee, and that hand supported his chin. The very way he held the cigar and stared at it was unbearably insolent. Not a word he said, just stared at the shipwrecked group. Mannix thought he smiled. "Reasi!" said the duke, and, raising himself on his thwart, returned with an even more insolent expression his enemy's stare. The two remained staring across so, each with all the insolence and contempt he could muster. Suddenly the Jap called out something, short, sharp, and in Russian. Mannix could not get what he said.

"Oh! cried the sailor—"Oh—to Your Grace!" and sank back.

The Jap slowly placed his cigar between his lips and puffed, blew the smoke toward them and smiled. Mannix could just see that smile in the gloom. "Pardon," said the duke, and, taking Mannix's revolver, fired.

The Jap made as if to stand up, and did half stand up for an instant. Then his body took a forward tilt, sagged the air, and he fell. With the splash of the body, the sailor seized the duke and dropped overboard. "Come, Your Excellency," he whispered to Mannix, and made for an overturned boat. The next in line it was, with a plank torn out near the keel. Mannix followed the sailor. "I can use my arms, but not my legs," whispered the duke. "Now, Your Excellency," called out the sailor, and Mannix and the duke swung beneath the water, followed by the sailor beneath the cannon of the overturned boat.

Between the surface of the water and the bottom of the overturned boat was room and air for twenty men to hob around and breathe in. They had only to hang onto a thwart to keep themselves afloat. The boat, which they had just left lay between them and the destroyer while they were in the water, and so prevented them from seeing what was doing about here; but now an explosion set their new refuge to dancing over their heads. Mannix looked through the hole near the keel. The destroyer's people were shooting at the boat they had just left. Another shell, and there was nothing left of it. Then possibly to make sure that none had survived, the destroyer steamed back and forth.

They watched her steam off in the last of the daylight. That was just after sunset—in the twilight.

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